

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Fifteen

Harvey Johnston and His German Friend

IT WAS JULY, 1950, and Harvey Johnston sipped from his glass and thought that if he didn't get out of Chicago soon, he'd go crazy.

"Stranger in the city, sailor?" questioned the man on the bar stool next to his.

"Yeah," replied Harvey.

"Rather thought you were. Royal Canadian uniform, isn't it?"

"Uh huh," Harvey answered. The man beside him was short, talked like a German, and had a friendly grin. "I'm from Silver Creek way in British Columbia. Signed up with the navy a couple of years ago when I was nineteen. Stationed in Halifax now.

"I'm a stranger here and no mistake," Harvey went on.

"And I'm not staying in this town long, either. I'm heading for Mexico City. Want to get there as fast as I can, make the most of my furlough. It'll only last thirty days.

"Say, you don't know of any rides outa' Chicago, going south, do you?"

The German twirled his empty glass around. "Well, yes, my friend, by coincidence I believe I can help. I have a friend who works for a company in New Orleans. This man has bought a car here in Chicago and wants it delivered to him down there. Odd thing, I'd like to go south myself. Now, this would be free transportation for us both."

Harvey broke in. "Hey, that's a brainstorm."

The German called for another drink. Then he added, "But there's one hitch to it. We would need money for gasoline."

"Oh, sure," Harvey said. "Naturally. How much would it come to?"

The German pulled an old envelope out of his pocket. Harvey found a pencil in the napkin holder on the counter. Watching the German scribble names of cities and add up mileage, Harvey was reveling in his luck. He was practically in Mexico City already. That Mexico City dream carried Harvey back to July, 1950, and his twenty-second birthday. He was drunk that night, but not quite sure of it.

"Buster," he said to his buddy, slopping some rum down the front of his uniform. "Something's got to be done."

"What do you mean, Harvey?"

"I got to find something else to drink." "Tired of rum?" queried Buster.

"Not on your life. I love it. But it's lost its kick. I drink and drink and drink the stuff and nothing happens."

"Don't feel a thing?" asked Buster.

"Don't feel a thing." Harvey shook his head. "Then I got a solution. More rum."

"Naw."

"Neater rum!"

"Neater, huh?"

"Yeah, you've been drinking the stuff watered down.

Take it neat, like a man."

"Maybe you're right. Hey, barkeep. Make it four double shots of straight rum."

Buster's idea was a bad one. Undiluted rum left Harvey cold. Not enough kick. He heard the stories about Mexico City's tequila.

Later in the same July, Harvey developed what he thought were some big ideas.

"My furlough's due," he told Buster. "Thirty days more. I'm not going home this time. I'm sick of playing the angel around Dad and Mom. Every furlough since I've joined up, I've been doing it. This time I'm heading for Mexico City."

Buster grinned. "Tequila, huh?"

"That's for me. They say you can get drunker and stay drunker on that stuff than anything else. Want to come along? I'm going to hitchhike."

"Not me," said Buster. "I can get just as drunk in Chicago, I guess. Mexico City is too far."

"O.K., fella. I gotta hit the road."

Harvey sat in the Chicago bar now and watched the German draw two lines at the bottom of the envelope, lick the top of his pencil and write the last figure with a flourish. "Now we can divide that between us." He shoved the envelope in front of Harvey.

Harvey fingered his wallet. The price of gas would leave him about thirty dollars. But the deal sounded good. He peeled off the bills, slapped them into the German's hand. He could always work a day or two in New Orleans to build up his fund.

Harvey and the German went out of the bar arm in arm. Once outside, Harvey slapped his new pal on the back.

"Tomorrow," he said. "I'll meet you here. Early." A nod was all he received.

He watched the German go along the street. Then Harvey turned and headed back to the Pacific Garden Mission.

Of course, it was all a mistake, his staying in the mission. And all the fault of the stupid truck driver who had picked him up along the Michigan highway. He had been a friendly guy; he confided his love affairs, and envied Harvey his trip to Mexico City.

"Going straight through?" was the question he put. "No," Harvey had said. "Got to sleep somewhere. Thought I'd stop in Chicago a while. Thought about the park for tonight, but it looks like rain."

"Saving your dough? Sounds like tequila to me."

"Say that again. I'm not going to waste it on hotels and grub if I can help it." Harvey was positive on that point.

"Say, kid, I know a place you can stay, sleep and eat, free for nothing. All you need in order to get in is a uniform. It's a servicemen's center on South State Street. I picked up a couple of soldiers the other day that stayed there. Said they'd had a good bed and they could eat for free. I know just where it is. I can drop you out about five blocks from the place." That was the recommendation of the trucker.

Here he was in front of the place. Sure, it was a servicemen's center all right. But not run by the goodhearted U. S. government. No, it was run by a mission!

On the sidewalk in front of 646 South State Street Harvey argued with himself a long time. No religion, he said, I can't take it. Yes, but it's worth the price of four bottles of tequila, he

cautioned himself. He went in, and was assigned.

His bed was clean. Breakfast was hearty the morning following. A mild-looking man sat down next to him while he was eating.

"Morning, Sailor. Sleep well?"

Harvey grunted, forked into his fried egg. "Got enough to eat?"

"Sure," Harvey said. What was that, a New Testament sticking out of the fellow's pocket?

"How'd you happen to come to the center?"

Harvey hadn't come to any center. He'd had a free bed. He wanted to poke the Psalm-singer. But not until his free meal was finished.

"Hitched a ride in a truck. Driver told me about this place," he said, then filled his mouth full.

"GOD works through everybody and anybody," the mild-looking man said. "You do believe in GOD?"

Harvey was losing his appetite. "Never thought about it."

"Well, you're not here by chance, Sailor. Don't kid yourself."

He got away from breakfast as fast as he could. About twenty feet from the center he found a bar, went in and ordered a beer to wash the thought of the Psalm-singer out of his mind. That was where and when he met the German. At the time, one good break seemed to even out the bad.

Harvey had turned and walked in the opposite direction from the German. He had slept that night in the center, but next morning, he didn't wait for breakfast. He went straight to the bar, and began his wait for his pal. One beer.

Then Harvey had a straight rum. The German was nowhere in sight. He drank the rum facing the door, waiting. At noon, he was as jittery and nervous as he could be. Where was that German?

By four, he was in a fury. If he comes in now, I'll slam his teeth down his throat, he thought. The bartender came over, swished a dishrag lazily across his table as he remarked, "You still here, Sailor?"

"Yeah," Harvey answered. "Still waiting for that same guy."

"I could have told you early this morning you was waiting for nothin'."

"What do you mean?" Harvey asked.

"That German fellow makes a soft living. You're not the first green kid he's chiseled. He'll wait

till you're out of town, then he'll be back to work his racket on somebody else."

Harvey stood up, banged his fist on the bar. His glass spun around. "Why didn't you tell me this before? You saw me sitting here all day."

The bartender laughed. "I'm no fool. You spent a lot of money with me today."

The man was right. Much of his remaining cash he'd spent on drinks. He went out to the street.

"Why that dirty Kraut, that good-for-nothing German." He was trembling, he was furious.

"My whole furlough shot to bits. He won't get away with it. I'll get him yet. I won't leave Chicago till I get him.

"And when I do, I'll put a 9 mm. bullet right between his eyes."

Harvey turned to go up the street toward his free night's lodging.

He figured out his next move with precision. "I'll be hanging around a few days." he informed the mission men. "Plans have changed." he added vaguely. That settled his room and board. Next, he signed up for a warehouse job. Maybe he could make up his cash before his thirty days were over.

Then, Harvey Johnston took his last dollars, went out and hunted up a Skid Row pawnshop where he bought a second-hand pistol. He wasn't "kidding" about ending the German's life.

Dodging the mission meetings after his free suppers wasn't always easy, but he schemed and managed it. Every night, after his warehouse work and his mission supper, he was on the prowl for the German. Along State Street, Van Buren, West Madison, he would range, fingering the pistol in his pocket.

That man going in the bar, he had the same slouch.

No, it wasn't the German.

What about that other man talking to the woman leaning against the lamp post? No, his hair was too dark.

And it wasn't the fellow trying to start a crap game with a bunch of sailors, either.

Up and down, through back alleys, down side streets, into bars and penny arcades, always with his hand on the butt of his pistol.

One day Harvey didn't slip out of the mission fast enough.

"Still around?" the mild-looking man cornered him as he was leaving. "Thought you were leaving for Mexico City."

"I was," Harvey growled. "Plans change."

The man nodded. "Well, Harvey, I can tell you that what you think is keeping you here isn't actually the real reason."

"Listen, Mister, it's the real thing all right. I got something to do before I leave. Something that would scare a Psalm-singer like you out of a year's growth, if I told you."

"I don't scare easily - I've been on the street, myself, Buddy."

Harvey tried to go past him. Maybe the German was going by the mission door right then. He couldn't lose a minute. He had to get out. But the mild-looking man with the soft talk about GOD was beginning to get him down. He heard him saying something about the service that night. "Whatever's wrong in your life, GOD can fix it," he repeated.

Wouldn't it be a laugh if the man were right, Harvey thought. I'll go to that meeting and I'll pray. Yes, I'll pray that GOD will strike that Kraut dead. Then I can go on my way to Mexico City and tequila.

Harvey squirmed through the sermon that night. JESUS CHRIST - way of salvation - eternal life. He'd heard it from his chaplain, from his father and mother. It didn't mean him. It never had.

Until that night he heard it: "If you turn your life over to JESUS CHRIST, the Son of GOD, He can take even murder out of your life."

Even murder. It struck Harvey between the eyes, struck him so hard he shot his hand up for prayer before he thought about what he was doing. Now that was a fool thing; he must get out of the meeting fast. "Sure, sure," he told the mild-looking man later, on his way out. "I'm fixed up fine. All the way; it's the only answer. You were right."

Harvey didn't look for the German that night. Instead he went out and got drunk.

One more sermon, then pay day at the warehouse.

Harvey packed his duffel bag, and checked out of the center, and checked in at a cheap hotel. He didn't bother to say good-by to the mild-looking man who had annoyed him so much.

His furlough time ticked off slowly. Still he continued his search for the German. Night after night, he locked the door of his little room in the hotel, handed the key to the clerk and crossed the ragged rug to the lobby door. By now the faces on the Skid Row streets looked alike - drunks, beggars, young lads with blotched faces, women with faces and lips covered heavily with rouge, but no German.

It was the twenty-fourth of July when Harvey decided to go back to the bar where first he had met the German, the bar that was about twenty feet from the Pacific Garden Mission. "I'll wait him out; I'll sit there till he comes back. Yes, I will.

"Not that I want to be near that mission again," he scoffed at himself.

When he came down the city block, he heard singing.

"Softly and tenderly, JESUS is calling-"

the words came toward him on a fetid Skid Row breeze. Not "calling" for Harvey Johnston, not for a man out to murder, oh, no!

He stood still outside the mission; then he walked on toward the bar, walked faster until he had gone beyond. He didn't slow down until he got to his hotel. He took the key from the clerk and went upstairs to his room.

First he got into bed, pulled the covers way up. He couldn't sleep, although dead tired. He paced the floor. He still felt jittery. Next he read the first chapter in a mystery novel he had bought for a quarter.

Then he threw the book across the room into an overstuffed chair. On the bureau, he saw a little red book the mission folks had given him. He arose, handled it, turned it over and opened it to the words, "These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."

He slammed the little book shut. From the back cover, the words seemed to leap up at him, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man . . . will open the door, I will come in."

"Hey, He's talking to me," Harvey said out loud. "O.K., Lord, I give up. The door's open. Come in, JESUS, come in and stay. Change my 'lousy' nature, Lord. I have to have a new one. This life I'm living is driving me crazy. JESUS CHRIST, eternal life, I've heard a dozen times, now I believe it."

That was it for Harvey Johnston. Quick and sudden.

He looked at himself in the mirror. He looked different. "Good-by, Mexico City," he said aloud. "Hello, Heaven. Good-by, Harvey Johnston. Hello, JESUS CHRIST. Good-by German. Good-by, murder."

It was good-by for Buster and Harvey's old drinking pals, too, when he got back to Halifax. Nowadays he spends his free weekends with his buddy.

JESUS CHRIST works right along with them. Together they're taking the salvation story to a fishing village near Halifax, giving tracts and Gospels of John to everybody and telling them, "If you turn your life over to JESUS CHRIST, the Son of GOD, He can take even murder out of your heart."

The miracle in his life continues, Harvey Johnston, unshackled.

~ end of chapter 15 ~